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How do UK universities support bereaved students? A case study



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This article reports on a small, qualitative, in-house pilot case study on student bereavement support at one UK university, where I work. The study's aim was to examine how bereaved students are supported to continue their studies and recover their emotional well-being from the perspectives of both previously bereaved students and staff involved in dealing with student bereavement. To this end, I conducted a review of available support as documented on the university's internal webpages, interviews with bereaved students, and interviews and focus groups with relevant staff. Being part of the social reality I was investigating afforded me access to study participants, some of whom were colleagues I worked with; website information to which an outsider would not be privy; and private spaces on campus to accommodate the interviews and focus groups. This situation fostered a 'collaborative approach', placing me both inside and outside the field of study. This twofold perspective was invaluable for identifying key messages that took account of both opportunities and barriers within the university environment for improving support for bereaved students.

Background

I have found no previous UK research on this topic. However, studies of late adolescence suggest bereavement may be particularly challenging for this age group. This challenge reflects the transitional and therefore insecure status of being 'adults in the making' (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001), when one's goals and sense of identity and direction are pivotal, though still forming (Brent, Melhem, Masten, Porta, & Payne, 2012). For university students this involves living away from family and adjusting to full time study and university life, including institutional expectations, pressures, resources and constraints, both ideological and structural. USA research on bereaved college students confirms this picture (Balk, 2011, 2008), while also identifying further challenges for both bereaved

students and staff who support them, reflecting how universities in both countries have become increasingly corporate (see Collini, 2012; Furedi, 2011). The corporatisation of Higher Education has entailed a change in core values, emphasising individual achievement, high performance/morale, competition and a campus culture of fun. Such values are seriously challenged by death and its reminder of impermanence, loss and unpredictability, discouraging young adults from sharing their loss. As found in the US, this situation suggests students' grief is likely to be disenfranchised, leading to a sense of isolation, being different and pressure to pretend everything is OK (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008; Doka, 1989). Yet, given sufficient time and appropriate support, students have been found to grow through bereavement to develop increased resilience (Bonanno, 2009), maturity and well-being (Joseph, 2012; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Though beyond the study's remit, it is worth noting that universities are part of a wider workplace culture, similarly emphasising aspiration and achievement. Therefore it is likely that university staff affected by bereavement may also experience disenfranchised grief, depending on the bereavement policies and related support provided by their institution's Human Resources Department. Studies of workplace bereavement more generally have found that grief may be disenfranchised due to expectations that employees exhibit high morale, motivation and productivity (Corden, 2016). Yet, as with student bereavement no research has considered how UK universities handle staff bereavement. However, as studies on employee bereavement have found, lack of understanding and poor practice may have serious repercussions for both employees and employers. Thus, employees may suffer prolonged grief and related illness, depression and loss of income; while employers may incur increased business costs due to absenteeism and related lower productivity, reduced

staff cohesion and poor work relationships (Sunoo & Sunoo, 2002). This situation reflects a wider argument for improving how bereavement is supported in the workplace as a whole, but which so far has not considered universities, neither the students who are being prepared for the workplace nor the staff who support them.

The study

Review

In examining how bereaved students are supported, I began by familiarising myself with available resources as detailed on the university's internal website, including those provided by Student Services, the Chaplaincy Centre, the Students' Union, the Academic Registry, four faculties with 21 departments between them, the Graduate School and Doctoral College. Information on emotional, spiritual and general advice and support was easily accessible via user friendly sites provided by Student Services, the Chaplaincy Centre and the Students Union: Student Services providing counselling and well-being/advice, though no dedicated bereavement support; the Students Union providing both academic and personal issues; and the Chaplaincy providing pastoral care/support. However, in a context of inflexible study and assessment schedules bereavement may considerably disrupt a student's studies. Yet, accessing information on how such disruption could be minimised was far from straightforward. While the Academic Registry site provides guidance on dealing with circumstances affecting students' studies, finding out how departments implement the various procedures involves cross-checking with other sites, including the Students' Records and Examination Office, and each of the 21 departmental websites. Also none of the procedures are bereavement-specific, but rather may include bereavement subject to there being sufficient evidence to meet required criteria.

To help minimise the impact of circumstances that may disrupt students' studies, depending on when these occur, an extension may be given for completion of coursework and related assignments; in extreme cases suspension of studies may be considered. If the disruption occurs close to the assessment period, a student may apply for 'individual mitigation circumstances', or IMCs, to be taken into account when marks are finalised, subject to providing evidence of their academic performance having been temporarily affected. IMCs are mostly used for exams in that an extension (which may be appropriate for an assessed essay), or taking an exam at a later date may compromise parity and fairness. There is also an appeals process for challenging failed applications for mitigation or suspension. However, the devil is in the detail and I was left feeling somewhat confused, though in a better position to identify staff members likely to

play key roles and have practical experience of these academic resources.

Interviews with staff

To find out how bereaved students were supported both emotionally and academically across a relatively large campus, I needed to engage a wide range of staff, including academic, administrative and support staff from different departments as well as those working for Student Services, the Students' Union and Chaplaincy Centre. However, once interviewing was underway, those I interviewed would often refer me to colleagues they knew would be able to contribute further. I was also able to take advantage of the project's time frame (August to November) being partly outside the academic year to include August, when staff time-tables were more flexible, enabling me to arrange face to face interviews with 20 staff members. These included associate deans, directors of learning and teaching, directors of studies, senior and personal tutors, academic registry staff, counsellors and well-being advisors, Students' Union representatives and the University Chaplain. In all cases I asked interviewees to recount their experience of student bereavement. The informality of these interviews enabled considerable depth of engagement with how bereaved students were supported from the perspectives of staff members with different roles and working in different parts of the university. The notes I took during interviews were written up in detail and studied along with the student interview and staff focus group data.

Interviews with bereaved students

While the study's timing worked well for recruiting staff, it was not the case for recruiting bereaved students, most being away from campus during August and September. I therefore needed to conduct the interviews as soon as possible once Autumn Term was underway, during the first week of October. As a result, I was only able to recruit two previously bereaved students, both male and bereaved between 2.5 and 4 years ago. Recruitment was assisted by two well-being advisors, a senior tutor and a Students' Union advisor, who made email contact with bereaved students they had previously supported and felt might be interested. In these emails students were assured they were under no obligation to respond. Though I ended up with a smaller sample than I hoped, the data obtained from these interviews nonetheless provide a range of experiences and understandings likely to reflect themes having relevance beyond the sample. In response to open-ended questioning, each student provided a detailed picture of how they coped with bereavement while studying at university. Each consented to their

interview being audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed for the purposes of the study.

Staff focus groups

I conducted two focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes, with staff from different parts of the university, some having taken part in the informal conversations. Focus group invitations were emailed to the 20 members of staff interviewed informally, as well as other relevant staff with whom I was unable to arrange an individual meeting. Two dates were offered and a total of 10 staff members agreed to attend, 3 opting for group 1 and 7 for group 2. Each member received a topic guide and set of themes—informed by the staff and student interview data—to consider in advance. With participants' consent, discussions were audio-recorded and the data transcribed, studied and analysed, along with the interview data, to identify four themes prominent across the three data-sets: understanding bereavement; supporting studies; emotional support; and staff responses.

Study findings

Understanding bereavement

Both focus groups discussed the need to identify what bereavement entailed, recommending a wide definition encompassing an appreciation of how other cultures engage with death, including the importance of relationships beyond immediate family. For example, the deaths of relatives other than immediate family may be considered primary losses in some cultures, as one of the students I interviewed recounted, being from Ireland. Having experienced a lack of understanding from both staff and fellow students of the impact of the death of his Aunt on his capacity to contribute to a group-work assignment, he explained:

... in Ireland, especially Catholic Ireland, families are very close indeed and I was really close to my Aunt. And that was one of the problems in that people over here couldn't understand that. So I think there needs to be more cultural awareness...

Both individual staff interviews and focus groups raised culturally unacknowledged losses within one's own culture, such as miscarriage, abortion, perinatal death, losing grandparents and pet loss. There were strong feelings on both sides, with some staff prioritising empathy and discretion and others more inclined towards setting limits, particularly when it came to losing a pet. Some staff expressed concern that these unacknowledged losses could discourage students from seeking support, therefore disenfranchising their grief. Others felt a wide definition could encourage students to 'work the system', citing how grandparent losses tended to increase around assessment periods.

However, regardless of concerns about bereavement being used as an excuse, some staff felt there needed to be more understanding of how students' grief in general was likely to be disenfranchised in such an 'upbeat', 'full on' environment, both physical and virtual. The loss of energy and motivation that typically accompanies bereavement was therefore likely to be worrying for students. Indeed, one bereaved student reported feeling concerned about the negative impact on his studies, while the other student recollected how isolated he felt.

I lost energy for a while - I'd been getting high grades then my grades started going down. I was on track for a first and then I started to worry I wouldn't make it.

If I had a choice between losing my Aunt and being ill I'd be ill any day – it was much easier than being bereaved. Also I got plenty of support when I was ill – people could relate to that whereas they couldn't relate to my bereavement and how lonely I felt...

However, these students also reported feeling bereavement had changed them for the better, an experience echoed in the focus groups, some staff having witnessed students engaging more fully with their studies after a period of coping with bereavement.

But it has also made me, I don't know, a better person I guess – such as not putting things off so much.

I guess I did find a kind of determination and persistence in myself that kept me going.

Supporting studies

From staff interviews and focus groups I gained the impression of there being plenty of resources, yet the system was complex and confusing with variations between departments and faculties and no obvious signposting. The bereaved students too reported 'there was no signposting at all' and 'I didn't really know what there was and where to start'. Rather, the onus was on the bereaved student to be proactive at a time of feeling particularly vulnerable, and, at least, inform an appropriate member of staff as soon as possible, such as their personal tutor, course convenor or director of studies (who would need to be informed if a student's circumstances were affecting their studies). However, some students may feel too daunted to approach a member of staff, particularly where bereavement is concerned. Also, it may not be clear to them who they should approach, the implications of not telling someone, what support they were entitled to and how to access what was available.

For example, in applying for an IMC students may not realise the paperwork they need to complete applies solely

to one specific assessment, not across the board and they must make a separate application for each. They may not understand the need to provide concrete evidence to convince the IMC panel of the bereavement's *significance* in being likely to temporarily impair their academic performance, for example, the death certificate or funeral sheet. Given the 72 hour framework for completing an IMC, this requirement may place a student in the distressing position of having to broach this with the family immediately following the death. Indeed a staff member cited an example of a student bereaved by a friend's suicide being required to ask the family for proof. For this reason, some bereaved students may avoid applying for an IMC, particularly if they feel they are managing, though, as both the students I interviewed reported, such feelings can be unreliable.

I thought I was fine ... going back to campus I thought I'd got it all out of my system – until I went to my lecture and I just felt – everything became a blur – it felt quite scary. I just couldn't think straight and my legs felt like jelly.

I thought I'd be able to cope much better than I actually did. I thought well I've had plenty of time away - about 3 weeks – so I'll be ready to pick things up again. But it wasn't like that at all – I really struggled.

However, in such cases a student may appeal on the grounds of 'undisclosed mitigation', academic staff indicating they would refer students to a Students' Union Advisor for help with making such an appeal. Both academic and SU staff felt these appeals were particularly relevant for bereaved students who were in shock or too distraught to apply for an IMC during the 72 hour window. Also the role of the SU was considered important in being independent of academic departments and more approachable for students, particularly if they felt their department had treated them unfairly. For some students, the SU may also be more approachable than Student Services, though SU staff may refer students to Student Services, with which they have a close working relationship.

Yet, questions were raised about whether mitigation was actually helpful; while tending to raise students' expectations of receiving a higher grade, it had little effect on final grades. Indeed staff felt bereaved students generally did not understand the implications of mitigation, which merely flagged up poor performance that could not be helped. Also, the 72 hour time frame for completing an IMC was considered unrealistic for international students who may need to make travel plans or older students who may have to deal with probate, funeral arrangements and so on. Staff also noted that for students suffering from the impact

of bereavement further down the line, an IMC application would probably fail the test of academic performance being 'temporarily' affected. This definition is intended to rule out long term, ongoing conditions, for which suspension is considered more appropriate. Thus a bereaved student would need to show they have been affected by an unexpected resurgence of grief during the assessment period.

For bereavement occurring away from assessment periods and requiring students to miss lectures, therefore affecting coursework, support depended on students informing their course convenors. In such cases staff felt course convenors should assist with materials beyond what was available on moodle - the university's virtual learning environment - to make up for missed lectures. However, it was acknowledged that whether or how extra support was provided depended on individual course convenors and their knowledge and understanding of the student's situation. Also a bereaved student may not be aware of any entitlement to such support.

Emotional support

As indicated, Student Services include 'counselling and mental health support', and 'well-being advice and support', both encompassing though not including dedicated bereavement support. The student counsellor reported increased use of the service generally, though a lull in students seeking bereavement support. However, well-being advisors reported seeing more bereaved students than the counselling service, possibly because they work more informally. Unlike counselling, there is no requirement to fill out an assessment form, followed by a further clinical questionnaire on being offered an appointment. For this reason one of the students I interviewed opted to see a well-being advisor rather than seek counselling.

I didn't go for counselling because you have to fill in this form first and I just couldn't face all those questions, they just seemed pointless. I can't understand why they need to ask all those things – it really put me off...

Staff too acknowledged how the informality and flexibility of the well-being and advice service was likely to be more approachable for bereaved students, as the above student confirmed.

I didn't feel like I needed to do anything or qualify for anything, if that makes sense?

Similarly, the Chaplaincy Centre works more informally, with no form filling, as well as being for all faiths or none. Also the University Chaplain works closely with Student Services in cases of death occurring on campus. Though not directly

involved with the impact of bereavement on students' studies, the role of these services in supporting a student's capacity to cope emotionally and make sense of their loss, is likely to have a positive impact on their ability to engage with their studies. They may provide a safe and reassuring space apart from the mainstream of university life through validating an experience that may seem at odds with the status quo. Indeed, findings from the US suggest these services have a key input into helping students grow and mature through bereavement (Balk, 2008), including developing the resilience needed to continue their studies. Yet some focus group staff reported knowing little or nothing about these services.

Staff responses

Staff from both interviews and focus groups felt too much was expected of bereaved students in accessing support, the present system requiring them to be proactive at a time when they may be in shock and unable to articulate what has happened. Rather, they felt staff needed to be more 'bereavement-friendly', including noticing when a student seemed in trouble and checking out with them whether this was the case. Should a student have difficulty articulating what they were experiencing, staff, particularly personal tutors, could help them by asking simple, direct questions, such as, were they sleeping, eating and so on? To raise staff awareness it was suggested that information on bereavement should be provided that included its likely impact on students as well as some specific examples of what staff could/should do. In the meantime, the personal tutor 'fact sheet' provided by Student Services was identified as particularly helpful for providing pastoral care. In considering how proactive staff should be, some staff suggested they should be prepared to walk a student over to Student Services should the student express wanting to talk to someone yet feel unable to take the necessary step on their own. However, others felt uncomfortable with this more proactive approach, believing it was only possible to help a student if they asked for help. Yet, in either case, both groups felt staff needed to know more about Student Services to be able to refer students on.

Focus groups also raised concerns about the impact on staff of supporting bereaved students, noting there may be times when, for personal reasons, a staff member may not be in a position to adopt this role. In such cases, staff needed to know it was acceptable to refer a student to a colleague. Otherwise Student Services 'staff helpline' was considered an important resource in the event of staff being affected by the impact of supporting a bereaved student.

Conclusion

From these findings, I have identified the following five areas, each evoking two key messages that could serve as a

starting point for developing a more bereavement-friendly environment enabling students to grow through their bereavement:

1. Key messages for raising *awareness/understanding* of the implications of bereavement for students.
 - a. Without support, bereavement can severely disrupt students' studies and hopes for graduating, as well as their capacity to engage in university life.
 - b. With appropriate support bereavement can lead to personal growth.
2. Key messages for *effective signposting* for bereaved students
 - a. Make the student aware of their options based on what they tell you.
 - b. Help the student take the next appropriate step
3. Key messages for *responding sensitively* to bereaved students
 - a. Convey empathy particularly when responding to any help bereaved students may need, for example, applying for an IMC. A sensitive response may humanise what may be experienced as rather harsh, such as, having to supply concrete evidence of having experienced a significant bereavement.
 - b. Convey patience should a bereaved student appear vague or uncomprehending – bereavement can be exhausting and debilitating, affecting concentration and motivation.
4. Key messages for showing *cultural awareness* when responding to bereaved students
 - a. Do not make assumptions about which kinds of bereavement count as serious.
 - b. Be aware of added pressure on international students dealing with bereavement.
5. Key messages for *self-care* in relation to the impact of supporting bereaved students
 - a. Supporting others can take its toll so do not neglect your own need for support.
 - b. If necessary, consider handing over to someone else.

Though based on a small qualitative study of how one UK university supports bereaved students, these messages reflect findings that may have relevance to UK universities more widely. While representing experiences and concerns of staff and bereaved students, their implementation would need to take account of the challenges to accommodating student bereavement posed by a more corporate culture, in which grief may be disenfranchised (Doka, 1989). Nonetheless, these findings represent a starting point for building a fuller picture depending on the availability of research funding and funder priorities. In the meantime it is hoped the study will fuel further inquiry particularly in light of Universities UK's (2015) recent focus on student mental health. While bereavement is not a mental health issue it

may be a causal factor in mental health depending on the quality of available support (Brent, Melhem, Donohoe, & Walker, 2009). As indicated, with appropriate support bereavement may foster personal growth, suggesting universities have a responsibility to provide effective support for their bereaved students. Universities are also major employers of staff tasked with the responsibility for preparing the next generation of the workforce. Therefore, in arguing that this responsibility should include supporting bereaved students, it follows that there is a further argument to be made concerning support for bereaved staff, one that also implicates workplace bereavement more generally. ■

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